

Report belies stereotypes about Asians

A study reveals a highly diverse group, not all of whose members fit the 'model minority' label.

Asians in Sacramento County and throughout California are a highly diverse group who don't uniformly fit the "model minority" stereotype, which paints them all as high-achieving students and well-paid workers, according to a report unveiled at the Capitol on Thursday.

The study, produced by the Asian Pacific American Legal Center, shows that Asians and Pacific Islanders represent dozens of ethnic groups, cultures and languages. Some suffer disproportionately from poverty, limited English proficiency and low homeownership levels.

In Sacramento County, for instance, the study shows that 48 percent of Hmong residents live below the federal poverty line. "Some Asian and Pacific Islander ethnic groups are among the state's most disadvantaged, and should not be ignored by policy-makers," said Maeley Tom, vice chairwoman of the State Personnel Board, who moderated the morning discussion. "And how important it is for policymakers to understand that the needs of the Koreans, Chinese Americans, South Asians, are different from one another."

The study's supporters hope lawmakers will use it to target effectively the needs of Asians and Pacific Islanders in their communities.

Relying primarily on Census 2000 data, the report's authors conclude that Asians make up about 13 percent of the state's population, the highest concentration of whom live in the Bay Area.

Among the more than 20 ethnic groups broken down in the study, 80 percent of California's Hmong live in the Central Valley,

77 percent of Koreans live in Southern California and 53 percent of Tongans live in the Bay Area.

The largest percentage of Asian Indians in the state live in Sutter County, making up about 10 percent of the population there. The study also probes the Asian population's social characteristics. For instance, it shows that 22 percent of Pacific Islanders - among them Fijians and Samoans - have not completed high school.

Sacramento County's demographics are relatively consistent with those statewide, said Daniel Ichinose, with the legal center's demographic research unit.

"We have both tremendous growth and disproportionate need," Ichinose said.

For instance, he said, Sacramento County has the fastest-growing Pacific Islander population statewide. At the same time, about 19 percent of the county's Pacific Islander population is considered limited English proficient.

Henry Kloczkowski, executive director of the Sacramento Chinese Community Service Center, witnesses the diversity of the Asian and Pacific Islander population every day.

The service center provides a variety of services - including after-school programs and citizenship classes - for a broad range of residents. The citizenship classes, he said, cater mostly to elderly Chinese immigrants, but the after-school programs enroll Hmong, Mien, Vietnamese and some Chinese-Vietnamese students.

"It doesn't surprise me that the typical, white middle-class person like myself thinks of Asians as one category of people," Kloczkowski said. "As you learn more, you learn that it's a hugely diversified group of people."

Inside the Capitol, Assemblywoman Judy Chu, D-Monterey Park, called the study "ammunition" for new statewide policies. "Really, it is the foundation for future legislation," she said.

That sentiment was shared by Yolo County Supervisor Mariko Yamada, who attended the Thursday hearing.

She pointed to a statistic that names Davis one of 10 cities in California with the highest concentration of Asian poverty. Other cities on the list include Sacramento, Fresno, Stockton and Modesto. In addition to Davis, two other University of California hubs, Berkeley and Riverside, are on the list.

"Davis I think is a city ... that is viewed in the region as a community that's clearly well-educated. Many high-powered individuals who work in Sacramento live in Davis," she said. "It's just a fact that kind of jumps out at you."

Yamada, who is a social worker, said she will take the report to county staff members and ask them to address some of the social service issues it raises.

"It's just something that heightens my concern about how well I'm serving my own district and how well I'm able to make sure the services that individuals in my district, and countywide, will be able to access," she said.